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ABSTRACT

A series of interviews carried out over a 6-month period investigated: (1) why and how five New York City high school teachers used writing-to-learn across the curriculum, and, (2) the outcome of conducting research on one's own colleagues. Subjects were a math teacher, a physics teacher, and a career education teacher from a high school for limited English proficient students (where the researcher herself taught), and a biology teacher and a health and physical education teacher from a large, comprehensive academic high school in Manhattan. Findings revealed that all teachers displayed a lack of confidence in themselves as writers, and viewed writing as a means of getting students to communicate and clarify their ideas. Also, all subjects changed their classroom management style because of their work with writing-to-learn, encouraging more group work and extensive collaborative learning techniques. The study also revealed some of the positive outcomes of conducting research in one's own school--greater professional interdependence and collaboration, reduced writing anxiety among students and teachers, more awareness of the writing process by teachers, and more confidence in trying out new teaching strategies. Being a colleague/researcher affords a special point of view: a collegial, learning, non-evaluative perspective. (ARH)

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Collaboration as Community

Outcomes of Conducting Research on One's Colleagues

Marsha S. Slater

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You'd think that a veteran NYC high school English teacher on sabbatical would want to get out of the classroom and as far away from a school as possible, wouldn't you? A nice beach in the Fiji Islands, a little stroll on the Champs Elysee, a quiet cabin on the ocean at Cape Cod - escape.

But what I escaped to was another teacher's classroom. To be precise, I spent my sabbatical interviewing and observing five NYC high school teachers whose disciplines are not English. Today, I plan to tell you a little about the research I did. Then, I'm going to tell you about the effects of that study on myself and my school.

My research began over a year ago when I had the opportunity to do some classroom intervisitations with one of my colleagues, a Math teacher, whom I call Pia Hernandez in my study. She chose her own pseudonymn.

I was so taken by what I saw that, when I was on sabbatical to do research the following semester, I formed my research question around what I saw her do in her classroom; that is, using writing to help her students learn basic mathematics. By itself, this is unusual. Writing-to-learn stratiegies are not exactly part of the standard NYC Mathematics curriculum.

But, in addition, our small high school serves an exclusively limited English proficient population of 300 recent immigrants from over 30 different countries speaking over 20 different languages. Our classes are heterogeneously mixed by English and native language literary levels and the stress is on group and collaborative learning. In our school, we teach ESL through the content areas, but, even so, writing-to-learn is not considered a standard ESL practice for low-level beginners.

I wondered why, then, Pia was using writing in this way. Later, I expanded my question and research design beyond Pia to include 4 other teachers because I wanted to get a better idea of why teachers who are not English teachers use writing-to-learn across the curriculum. Therefore, besides Pia, I interviewed and observed two

more colleagues in my own school, David, a Physics teachers, and Magdalena, a Career Education teacher. Career Education is similar to vocational education or job training courses. The other two are a Biology teacher and a Health and Physical Education teacher in a large, comprehensive academic high school in Manhattan.

As a veteran English teacher and coordinator for the NYC Writing Project, I wanted to know why and how these five teachers had gotten started and why they continue to use writing in this way. What do they see in their classrooms that keeps them motivated to continue using writing-to-learn strategies? What has the whole experience been like for them?

That is, I decided to do research that would give me pleasure, that would allow me to look at a question of personal as well as professional interest. I must admit, though, that, at times, I was a little worried that if I enjoyed it too much, it couldn't be considered "real research."

I soon discovered that the answers to my questions go deeper than I had expected. As I continued the interviewing and observing process, I didn't know what I would find. It was as much a time of discovery for me as it was of anxiety, but my curiosity kept me going.

At one point I was at an impasse with Pia. I had discovered that she was genuinely invested in using writing with her students, but she did not keep a teaching log, she did not do creative writing for herself. She did not use the techniques she was sure were helpful for her students. Or so she said.

Then, one day in early April, during one of our interview sessions, she began crying. She was in the process of revising her own curriculum which was to be published the following month by our school. Her fear of writing was oppressive. I found out that she is a highly traumatized writer who, nevertheless, goes through several written drafts of lesson plans daily in order to discover the best way to teach each and every lesson.

She told me, "So much fear. I mean, no one knows the fear, the apprehension, the sweat I go through whenever I have to write. If a job depended on that, I would say, 'Forget it!'"

This became a consistent pattern. The other four teachers echoed her lack of confidence in themselves as writers, though less dramatically. They all corroborated Pia's initial impetus to try writing "as an avenue to explore for getting kids to communicate with me and for them to clear their ideas," or as a method of getting reliable feedback from students to aid in lesson planning and test preparation.

Each of the five research subjects also spoke of another pattern, one which surprised me. Each of the teachers has changed his or her classroom management style because of their work with writing-to-learn, encouraging more group work and extensive collaborative learning techniques. Pia says it best:" And that was what I was looking for - to make every one very responsible for their own learning."

At times, it was difficult being an observer in my own school. The students, most of whom I know, would want to talk with me in the halls and in the classrooms while I was observing. The assistant principal-in-charge of the school was only half joking when he told me that people on sabbatical ought to be banned from visiting: I looked too healthy and happy in comparison to the more tired faces around me.

At the beginning of my research, Pia was the one I knew the least well. After six months of study, I knew her most intimately.

I was about to say, "at the end of the study," but I don't think I will ever come to the end of it. As a matter of fact, since September when I returned from Sabbatical, I find that the research is having effects both on me and on my school. Every time one of my research subjects and I have a conversation, every time we engage in a faculty conference and I hear or one of them say something which bears on the question of writing-across-the curriculum, I start scribbling notes on my lunch tray or the nearest paper napkin. Then I run to my Macintosh to transcribe my notes before I forget and throw the pearls away with the garbage.

I keep a journal of such quotes and my musings about them. Doing research has been like opening a Pandora's box for me: I never know what the outcomes will be. Research does not end with the findings.

For example, one day while I was in school doing an interview, a site evaluator from NCTE came to decide if our school were to be chosen as an NCTE Center of Excellence in English Language Arts. The evaluator was having a conversation with the Physics teacher, David; Pia and our principal. I asked if I could sit in and tape it. As is my want, I proceeded to talk, too, but I'm glad I did because Pia needed the extra encouragement to go into detail about her use of math journals and the way she taught word problems. When David heard some of her techniques, he said, "Wow! I didn't know that was going on!" and wanted to visit her classroom and compare notes. You see, he uses Physics journals.

It turned out that we were named as a Center of Excellence, but more importantly, David and Pia now exchange ideas and revise their uses for journals and the way in which they have students keep journals.

Although the governance model of my school fosters collaboration amongst peers, our professional interdependence has been greatly enriched and expanded because of my research study. For example, we now share ideas collegially in a way one would not expect for a math, a physics, and an English teacher to do. Pia hands me articles from Mathematics Teacher about using writing to teach Calculus. David tells me that my use of journals in English classes makes it easier for his students to write comfortably about physics. Our Principal remarks about the ease and facility with which our students sit down to write: he sees none of the usual hesitancy and rampant fear. He attributes this to the widespread conscious attention to writing across the curriculum. Other teachers see our mutual support and ask us for advice in planning lessons, to include writing assignments. In our small teachers' room, we all listen and latch onto any good idea we hear.

Last year, in one of our last interviews, David, my physics colleague, said that he did not use writing as his first recourse for clarification of his own thoughts. David is now the chairperson of our faculty Curriculum Committee which is responsible for publishing an annual report which the teachers write. A month ago in that crowded teachers' room, I overheard him explaining the reason for writing drafts for this year's project. I wrote it down verbatim. He said, "Writing forces you to solidify and get more concrete in

your thinking. I view writing as a mechanism, that is, the process of revision, for changing your thinking about things." Apparently, he had changed his own thinking about writing.

The best outcome of my research for me, is that I feel I have more partners in a deeper sense of the word. I do not label my colleagues by department any more.

I have found nourishment and professional growth from looking at what I do with writing in my own classroom from the points of view of four other teachers from different disciplines. I have become more conscious and focused in how I use writing-to-learn in my English classroom.

And I know that if I have problems, I have more people to collaborate with than just the two excellent English teachers in my school.

For example, Pia and David have become people for me to bounce ideas off of, people to share my teaching successes and frustrations with. I serve this function for them, too.

Just over a week ago, Magdalena, the Career Education teacher, called me from Florida. She had left our school in September to relocate with her doctor husband. But she wanted to tell me that she was still using the journal I had given her to write her thoughts in.

And Pia, for example, has moved from being a traumatized writer to one who says "I can do this!" when she works on the current faculty curriculum project. Her husband, Al, tells her, "Do what Marsha told you. Brainstorm!" She walks into the teachers' room and says, when she sees me, "You don't know what you've done to me!" with a wide smile on her face.

I think that having a teacher researcher in any school would be highly worthwhile. But in our small school, the research study we participated in has helped turn our school into a support team. It has fostered a climate and attention on writing throughout the school. In addition, I have a deepened understanding of my colleagues, their pedagogcial and personal goals in teaching. I know, for example, that Magdalena, the Career Education teacher, used writing to bring the shyer Asian students into group work; Pia uses writing to help her students internalize the vocabulary and structure of mathematics, which she thinks of as a language; David, the Physics teacher, uses writing to focus students on their learning and also to break down the traditional roles of teacher and student. In addition, they all view their frequent use of writing in their classes as a way to help students overcome the fears and traumas they have experienced because of evaluative, red-penning teachers in their own pasts.

Being a teacher/researcher in one's own school is a less intrusive presence with students whose teacher I had been and for colleagues who know me and have a prior relationship with me. They were never intimidated by my presence or my questions. I like to think that that prior relationship counteracted the knowledge that they were being observed. Being a colleague/researcher affords a special point of view: a collegial, learning, non-evaluative perspective.

I'll use David's own words from an article he wrote for publication about our school. "Writing is an example of how collaboration among staff has proven successful at The International High School. When students write logs in science classes, write in their mathematics classes and write in their literature classes, they learn to write faster and with more confidence." Without his participation in the research group, he would not have known about and been able to rely upon the interdepartmental support he wrote about.

What he didn't say was that we teachers have also gained more confidence in trying out new teaching strategies and expanding old ones because of the support of our research network. We have each gained confirmation of what works well and why. Thanks to my on-going research, I have gained an unshakeable commitment to writing-to-learn for our limited English proficient students.